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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: AMBASSADOR MEETS WITH NLC TO DISCUSS
UNION PLANS TO STRIKE ON APRIL 1

1. (C) Ambassador Jeter met with the Acting President of the National Labour Congress (NLC), Joseph Akinlaja, on Thursday, March 27, 2003, to discuss, inter alia, NLC plans to begin a nationwide civil service strike on April 1. Akinlaja, who is also General Secretary of the National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG), issued a 14-day ultimatum to the GON on March 13 to either implement a September 2002 agreement to increase government salaries by 12.5 percent or face a nationwide indefinite strike by Nigeria's civil servants. The decision to call the strike was made while NLC President Adams Oshiomhole was in Geneva attending an International Labor Organization conference. Oshiomhole returned to Nigeria on March 30.

2. (C) During the meeting, the Ambassador emphasized the importance of peaceful, transparent elections as the nation moves toward its first successful civilian-to-civilian transition. He expressed concern that a strike could increase tensions in an already volatile environment, adding that whatever happens in Nigeria will affect the rest of West Africa. Akinlaja explained that GON mismanagement created the dispute; although the NLC tried to remain flexible in the interest of moving democracy forward, workers were no longer willing to make unnecessary sacrifices. He dismissed claims that the GON could not afford the increase and stated that state governments were consulted when the decision was made to reduce the salary increase from 25 percent to 12.5 percent since many states are already behind in paying their civil servants. Akinlaja assured the Ambassador that despite growing unhappiness among workers the NLC favors peace. As many as 4000 NLC members will register to serve as election monitors; this fact is clear evidence, Akinlaja said, of the NLC's commitment to lead Nigeria toward free and fair elections.

3. (C) Laboff spoke to Akinlaja on Monday, March 31, as the NLC finalized plans for the April 1 strike. Akinlaja said the NLC would not call off the strike unless the GON reopens negotiations before midnight on March 31. If the GON does not respond by midnight, civil servants will begin a three-day warning strike. NLC leaders are meeting today to plan their next steps if the issue is not resolved by April 1. Akinlaja said that after the three-day warning strike the NLC could suspend further action until after the elections.

4. (C) Comment: Although Oshiomhole returned to Nigeria only three days before the scheduled strike, he should still have enough time to work with President Obasanjo to defuse this impending strike action. Oshiomhole has little to gain from a major labor crisis two weeks before the elections. While a three-day warning strike or symbolic protest is likely, a disruptive strike could exacerbate tensions and lead to accusations that the NLC, which has championed preservation of democracy, is purposely trying to sabotage the process.

5. (C) Obasanjo may approve the increase only if he thinks the issue will derail the elections. However, a GON-approved pay raise that state governments could not fund could be more destabilizing. We therefore think that Oshiomhole will press for a solution that does not compromise his credibility within the NLC. While a symbolic or three-day warning strike is probable, Oshiomhole will likely play up labor's commitment to free and fair elections in order to convince NLC members to postpone further action related to the 12.5 percent increase until after the post-election transition in May. Oshiomhole may argue that as a quid pro quo for the NLC's deferring the strike, Obasanjo should agree to pay salary arrears and incremental salary increases until the 12.5 percent agreement is fully implemented. End Comment.
HINSON-JONES